

Price hikes will increase gender violence

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By Josie Fernandez

“As families increasingly struggle to earn enough to eat we are seeing how money is becoming more important than relationships, to the point that the social implications are potentially alarming. Policy-makers need to catch up.” - Naomi Hossain, Institute of Development Studies UK research fellow.

COMMENT A UN Habitat report in 2008 states, “It is also important to consider the impact on the physical security of women, through increased tendency to gender-based violence and domestic violence as worsening material conditions combine with a sense of helplessness among men, who then look for outlets for their anger and frustration. The increase in violence and insecurity of women in periods of economic crisis has been well-documented.”

Physical violence, sexual, social, verbal and spiritual abuse, in addition to psychological and economic harms, are recognised as gender violence.

When prices of goods and services increase, it is women who bear most of the burden as they have multiple roles as managers of household budgets, as health care providers and educators in the home. Women are breadwinners, too, as women’s participation in the labour force in Malaysia was 52.4 percent in 2013. The squeeze on family budgets may force more women to enter the labour force.

Response of women’s groups and unions

Price increases of goods and services will force families to adopt different survival strategies, including more women going out to work to provide for necessities of their families.

However, the government and women’s organisations have not given attention to the gender implications of the goods and services tax (GST) in the context of price hikes. On the other hand, women’s wings of Barisan National political parties are promoting GST without understanding the implications of this tax on women.

The GST which will be implemented on April 1 will erode the purchasing power of middle and low income households. Low income families will be hardest hit.

In view of rising prices, the Congress of Unions of Employees in the Public and Civil Services (Cuepacs) president Azih Muda recently said the government should conduct a review of salaries deferred over the past 15 years due to the rising cost of living being so high at present. He has asked for the review of the 252 salary schemes and allowances of civil servants prior to the Labour Day celebration on May 1 this year.

In the absence of social safety nets , the situation would be worse for middle and lower income households and single women-headed households.

Gender, GST and failure of women MPs

The gender perspective of GST for Members of Parliament has not gone beyond sanitary pads.

When Bintulu Member of Parliament Tiong King Sing on March 18 raised in Parliament the concerns of women in his constituency that sanitary products would be more expensive due to the GST, the response was laughter from other MPs at his statement.

Malaysians have become used to the matter of periods being turned into jokes in Malaysian Parliament.

We have reached this situation in Parliament because our women MPs have failed in raising gender concerns and protecting women's interests in policy-making processes.

The MPs fail to realise that sharp increases in food , medicines, health care and other household essentials will push more families to below the poverty line. Malnutrition among women and children may increase. According to the UN, "Worldwide, an estimated 60 percent of undernourished people are women or girls."

Food hardest hit by GST

Even sardines have not escaped the GST dragnet. Canned sardines are charged the goods and services tax because it is categorised as processed food, unlike luxury item lobsters.

Since people on lower incomes spend more as a proportion of their income on food - GST will hit the poorest hardest. Poor households would spend 50 to 60 percent of their income for food consumption.

Research shows that rising prices puts constraints on women's time as women are forced to look around to source food at lower prices. Recent local media reports are highlighting that shoppers, many of them women, are stocking up vegetables, fish, powdered milk, coffee, canned food, instant noodles, dish washing soap and detergents as these are essential items for families.

Medicines and private health care are subject to GST. Analysis of rising healthcare, medicines and fuel shows this will affect all particularly those in rural areas. However, analysis of the gender implications of rising prices of medicines including contraceptives in some countries indicate increasing violence against women.

Women customs officers sing songs of praise for the GST. Women are paid to appear on TV ads to praise the benefits of GST while women as mothers and managers of households are stocking up food and other essentials for their families before April 1.

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